



Luke Timothy Johnson, *Contested Issues in Christian Origins and the New Testament: Collected Essays* (Leiden: EJ Brill, 2013).

The thirty five essays here assembled have all appeared either in print previously in journals or books, or as lectures delivered to various academic assemblies. They span decades of Johnson's work, from 1978 to 2012, and they cover many aspects of New Testament scholarship. The collection is comprised of five major divisions:

1. Jesus and the Gospels- 6 essays
2. Luke-Acts – 7 essays
3. Paul – 8 essays
4. Other NT Compositions – 5 essays
5. Issues in Christian Origins – 9 essays

There are indices to ancient authors, modern authors, Scripture, and subject. The volume also includes an introductory chapter and acknowledgements. In total it has xxii + 745 pages. It is a massive volume.

The best part of the collection is the author's ability and willingness to bluntly and forthrightly say what needs to be said concerning ideas presently held by some of the leading New Testament scholars. Here are some examples:

... [N.T.] Wright is in his habit of forming of false alternatives (p. 56).

Perhaps the most egregious example of black-and white fallacy is the way Wright tends to caricature any understanding of religion that is not, by his definition, political (p. 57).

Just as his analysis of sources consisted simply in assertions supportive of his central thesis, Wright fails to supply a rationale for the way he actually uses the New Testament as evidence for his historical reconstruction (p. 63).<sup>1</sup>

And elsewhere

[Elaine] Pagels has a personal stake in rendering the GT as attractively as possible, for her analysis is preceded by what can only be called a personal narrative of gnostic discovery (p. 475).

Pagels has effectively equated John with evangelical Christianity and evangelical Christianity with exclusionary tendencies. As a master of the soft argument of suggestion, she knows that a further inference follows: canonical Christianity also is all about exclusion rather than inclusion (p. 476).

Pagels' treatment of John and Thomas is less a serious engagement with the two compositions than a slapdash and highly selective characterization (p. 477).<sup>2</sup>

Johnson isn't just at his polemical best here though. He is at his exegetical best as well. For instance:

... 2 Timothy follows with considerable fidelity the form of personal paraenesis described by Ps-Libanius and illustrated by Ad Demonium. In discourses exhorting others to become philosophers, the ideal teachers of virtue in Hellenism, we found the use of polemical language, ordinarily employed in disputes, to provide a contrast to the ideal model being sketched. It is among these writings, I suggest, that we find the real parallels to the function of the polemical language in 2 Timothy (p. 356).<sup>3</sup>

But perhaps where Johnson is at his very best is in his historical analysis of *Anti-Judaism and the New Testament* (Chapter 29). After describing the issues in all their complexity he dives a little deeper into the role of historical narrative in the relevant eras and shows that there was a considerable amount of anti-Jewish slander in ancient rhetoric; within Judaism itself!

To be sure, the New Testament contains a bit of it, but it is not alone. What Johnson calls 'the rhetoric of vilification' is also, and primarily, found within Jewish literature (aside from the New Testament). Josephus, Philo, and the sectarians at Qumran knew how to sling mud far better than the New Testament's authors. For instance, Josephus

... castigates Justus of Tiberius as "a charlatan and a demagogue and a deceiver" (p. 562).

Johnson continues

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<sup>1</sup> These examples from Chapter Three- A Historiographic Response to Wright's Jesus.

<sup>2</sup> Chapter Twenty Six, John and Thomas.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter Nineteen- 2 Timothy and Polemic.

The New Testament polemic against Jews appears in a new light when placed in the context of the conventional rhetoric used in disputes between ancient schools... (p. 564).

Readers may have read many of these essays in their first incarnations but many others may be unfamiliar with them since, for the most part, they are found buried within specialist sources. This is an important collection by a leading scholar and his work is deserving of careful concentrated attention. The present tome offers just that opportunity to see Johnson's work writ large.

It is an expensive book, however, and since many (perhaps even most) scholars cannot add it to their personal libraries they should nonetheless encourage their libraries to acquire it. It will be an important addition to the shelves it occupies and widely and regularly consulted.

Jim West  
Quartz Hill School of Theology